Species Fact Sheet Fisher Martes pennanti



STATUS: CANDIDATE

This species potentially occurs in these
Washington counties: Clallam, Mason, Grays
Harbor, and Jefferson.
(Map may reflect historical as well as
recent sightings)

The west coast distinct population segment (DPS) of fisher, *Martes pennanti*, was accorded federal candidate status in April 2004.

Current and Historical Status

Historically, fishers occurred in northern coniferous and mixed forests of Canada and the northern United States. Their range extended from the mountainous areas in the southern Yukon and Labrador Provinces southward to central California and Wyoming, the Great Lakes and Appalachian regions, and New England. Currently, the distribution of the fisher has retracted significantly south of the Canadian border and in the western United States and has remained similar to the historic range in the Yukon in Canada and the extreme northeastern United States.

The west coast Distinct Population Segment of the fisher includes the populations in Washington, Oregon, and California. The fisher's range and distribution within this DPS have been greatly reduced and fragmented.

In Washington, fishers historically occurred both east and west of the

Cascade Crest, on the Olympic Peninsula, and probably southwestern and northeastern Washington. West of the Cascade crest, fishers were more abundant below elevations of 3,280 ft. On the east slope of the Cascades where precipitation is lower, fishers were generally found between 1,970 and 7,200 ft. In Washington, due to lack of recent sightings or trapping reports, the fisher is considered to be extirpated or reduced to scattered individuals. Between December 2007 and February 2010, 90 fishers (40 females and 50 males) were captured in British Columbia and released into Olympic National Park. Although reproduction has been documented, it is still too early to determine if the reintroduced population is self-sustaining.

Description and Life History

The fisher, a member of the weasel family (*Mustelidae*), has a long body, short legs and a long, bushy tail. The head is broad and flat with a sharp, pronounced muzzle. The ears are broad, rounded, and low. Fur color varies from light brown to dark blackish brown, although the face, neck, and shoulders may have a lighter grizzled gray appearance. Adults range in length from roughly 2.5 to 4 feet. Males weigh 7 to 13 pounds; females weight about 3 to 5.5 pounds. It is estimated that fishers live up to 10 years. Retractable claws and the ability to rotate their large feet allow fishers to run down trees head first like a squirrel. Central pads on the hind paws have circular patches of coarse hair which are associated with plantar glands. These glands produce a distinctive odor believed to be used for communication to enhance reproduction.

Fishers are generally solitary animals except during the breeding season which typically occurs from late February through April. Implantation is delayed up to ten months, resulting in births nearly 1 year after copulation. Fishers have a low annual reproductive capacity, and reproductive rates may fluctuate widely from year to year.

Fishers are opportunistic predators that hunt exclusively in forested habitats. Their diet includes birds, porcupines, snowshoe hare, squirrels, mice, shrews, voles, reptiles, insects, carrion, vegetation, and fruit.

Habitat

Late-successional coniferous or mixed forests that contain key habitat and structural components provide the most suitable fisher habitat because they provide abundant potential den sites and preferred prey species. Key habitat components include relatively large diameter trees, high canopy closure, large trees (hardwood and conifer) with cavities, and large down wood.

Younger forests, in which complex forest structural components such as large logs and snags, and tree cavities are maintained in significant numbers, may also be suitable for fishers. However, intensive forest management does not typically retain key habitat and structural components. Therefore, early and mid-successional forests, especially those that have resulted from prior timber harvest, are unlikely to provide the same prey resources, protection from predators, and rest and den sites as more mature forests.

Reasons for Decline

The extent of past timber harvest is one of the primary causes of fisher decline across the United States and may be one of the main reasons fishers have not recovered in Washington, Oregon, and portions of California. In addition, the fisher has been commercially trapped since the early-1800s. Although exact numbers are unknown, trapping caused a severe decline in fisher populations. Road construction, urban development, recreation, and wildfires have also contributed to the decline of this species by fragmenting and reducing habitat.

Conservation Efforts

Continued implementation of the Northwest Forest Plan (November 2003) is expected to provide a network of connected reserves of late successional forest habitat surrounded by younger forest. Implementation of the plan will lead to a substantial improvement in current habitat conditions for the fisher on Federal lands.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, National Park Service, USFWS-Washington Fish and Wildlife Office and The U.S. Geological Survey began reintroducing fishers in Olympic National Park in 2007. Between December 2007 and February 2010, 90 fishers were released at several locations in the park. All the released fishers were fitted with radio collars and are being tracked to document movement patterns and survival. Three reintroduced females were documented having kits in 2009. Camera stations set up in remote locations of the park are capturing photos and videos of females and their kits.

References and Links

Species Assessment

USFWS Threatened and Endangered Species profile

USFWS Washington FWO

WDFW Website on Fisher Reintroduction to Olympic National Park

ONP Reintroduction

WDFW Final Status Report 1998

WDFW Recovery Plan

WDFW Feasibility Assessment

Conservation Assessment 2010